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ABSTRACT

The voyage of Columbus in 1492 is a turning point in world history. After 1492, people and civilizations of long-separated regions began to develop connections that have led to the incipient global community of the 1990s. It is their global significance that justifies a prominent place in today's curriculum for the four voyages of Columbus to the Western Hemisphere, not the mere fact of their 500th anniversary in 1992 and thereafter. Educators, therefore, should use the Columbian Quincentenary as a ripe time to renew and reform teaching and learning about these events of long ago that still affect most peoples and places of our world today. (Author)

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Teaching about the Voyages of Columbus

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The voyage of Columbus in 1492 is a turning point in world history. After 1492, peoples and civilizations of long-separated regions began to develop connections that have led to the incipient global community of the 1990s. It is their global significance that justifies a prominent place in today's school curriculum for the four voyages of Columbus to the Western Hemisphere, *not* the mere fact of their 500th anniversary in 1992 and thereafter. Educators, therefore, should use the Columbian Quincentenary as a ripe time to renew and reform teaching and learning about these events of long ago that still affect most peoples and places of our world today.

The Columbian Exchange. The far-reaching and transforming interactions of peoples in the Western and Eastern Hemispheres, which occurred after 1492, are known today as the "Columbian Exchange," the title of a seminal book by Alfred W. Crosby.

Crosby has provided an ecological perspective on the conditions and consequences of the Columbian voyages that should be included in the school curriculum. He has examined how plants, pathogens, and animals moved from one hemisphere to the other and changed natural environments and cultures. He has described the devastating effects of Eastern Hemisphere microbes on Western Hemisphere peoples and the subsequent shifts in the genetic composition of populations in the Americas. However, Crosby has emphasized that the "Columbian Exchange" has not been one-sided. Certainly European and African plants, animals, goods, and ideas have affected the Amerindians. But peoples of the Western Hemisphere have influenced the Europeans, Africans, and Asians too, especially in their cultivation of crops and preparation of foods.

Elementary and secondary school teachers should use Crosby's concept of the "Columbian Exchange" to help their students acquire an ecological perspective on world history. Thus, they will learn how cultural diffusion and social changes have shaped our modern world. And they will understand Crosby's most important message: Once begun, the "Columbian Exchange" cannot be reversed. The Columbian voyages and the subsequent Age of Exploration and Discovery have forged inseparable bonds between once separated peoples and civilizations, and there is no turning back.

Geography in History. Ideas of geography are indispensable aids to interpreting and understanding events and developments of history, such as the Columbian voyages and their consequences. This point is made convincingly by D. W. Meinig in his ground-breaking project, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*. Teachers should consult Meinig's work to understand how ideas in geography can improve explanations of events associated with the Columbian voyages and their global consequences.

Teachers should also use the five themes developed by the Joint Committee on Geographic Education. These five themes are location, place, relationships within places, movement, and regions. They have been endorsed as foundations of geography education by three prominent organizations: The National Geographic Society, the Association of American Geographers, and the National Council for Geographic Education. These five

themes, applied to inquiries about the Columbian voyages, can be used to bring a geographic perspective to events and developments in history.

The Person in History. As educators bring in often-neglected ecological and geographical perspectives to the study of the Columbian voyages, they must be careful to remember the importance of the great or prominent persons in history, such as Columbus. The term "great person" in history is not used here to denote extraordinary goodness or virtue; rather, it is applied only to those who have had the most far-reaching effects on the shape of our world. Thus, Columbus can be considered a great man because his decisions and deeds have had great global impact, from his era to our own times.

One key to understanding the Columbian voyages and their consequences is accurate information and interpretation about Columbus and his deeds. Teachers and students need to distinguish the many myths from realities about the life and times of Columbus. They should, therefore, consult the best biographical literature on Columbus. One recommended source is the time-honored biography by Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, which emphasizes the skills of Columbus as a sailor, leader, and visionary.

A new biography by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto has won high praise from scholarly reviewers for its judicious treatment of Columbus within his European context, as a man of a particular era, culture, and place in history. In this balanced and unbiased biography, Columbus's strengths and weaknesses are examined. Thus, for example, the author reveals Columbus's extraordinary achievements as a navigator and explorer and his great failures as a colonizer and administrator. Fernandez-Armesto's scholarly biography is a blend of sympathy and antipathy about the trials and triumphs of Columbus, who is shown to be neither a pure villain nor an undiminished hero. Teachers ought to follow the example of Felipe Fernandez-Armesto in developing realistic classroom portrayals of Columbus.

Multiple Viewpoints. A persistent threat to accurate and balanced treatments of the Columbian voyages is ethnocentric or monolithic interpretation. The school curriculum has often ignored or glossed over the diverse viewpoints of Amerindian

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and African peoples. Improved teaching and learning about the Columbian voyages must include the various voices of this fateful encounter between the diverse cultures of four continents and three races.

An excellent scholarly source of knowledge about Amerindian viewpoints on the European invasion of their lands is *Cultures in Contact: The Impact of European Contacts on Native American Cultural Institutions*, edited by William Fitzhugh. Teachers and students should also examine Amerindian perspectives discussed in *Two Worlds: The Indian Encounter with the Europeans, 1492-1509* by S. Lyman Tyler.

African and African-American views of the Columbian voyages are closely tied to a far-reaching and profound consequence of the "Columbian Exchange"—the Atlantic slave trade. Two highly recommended sources for teachers are Phillip D. Curtin's (1) *The Atlantic Slave Trade* and (2) *The Tropical Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade*. In addition, Basil Davidson's *The African Slave Trade* is an excellent source that presents the African context of the trade in human beings.

In presentations of multiple viewpoints about the conditions and consequences of the Columbian voyages, teachers should emphasize both diversity between groups and diversity within groups. For example, the great variations in responses of Amerindian people to their encounters with Europeans should be stressed in the school curriculum.

Move Beyond the Textbook. If teachers are to provide a multiplicity of viewpoints and perspectives on the Columbian voyages, they must move beyond the textbook to use various educational materials and resources. A recent survey of standard textbook treatments of Columbus, by Carla Phillips and William Phillips (1991, 27-30), reveals their serious limitations. The authors demonstrate that teachers must expose students to more accurate and profound examinations of the Columbian voyages than are provided in the typical textbook.

Development of classroom lessons based on primary documents is one way to provide realistic and detailed treatments of diverse viewpoints. *The Log of Christopher Columbus* is one primary document that can be the basis for challenging and illuminating teaching and learning activities.

"Columbus and the Age of Discovery," a well-designed seven-program documentary video series about Columbus's voyages, provides another excellent means of moving beyond the textbook to enrich teaching and learning in the classroom. These video programs, produced by the WGBH Educational Foundation of Boston, were broadcast initially on PBS in October of 1991. They will be shown again on PBS channels in October of 1992 and in 1993. The director of this video series, Zvi Dor-Ner, has also written a companion book to his television programs, *Columbus and the Age of Discovery*.

Dor-Ner's book is first rate in its presentation of the European context of the Columbian voyages, the key events of Columbus's life, and the global consequences of his deeds. In both his video programs and book, Dor-Ner avoids the flawed extremes of uncritical glorification and super-critical denunciation of Columbus, which have distorted too many treatments of his life and deeds. Thus, teachers should make ample use of Dor-Ner's videos and companion book in developing lessons and research projects for their students.

Write to WGBH for information about their video series, *Columbus and the Age of Discovery*, and an accompanying *Teacher's Guide*: 125 Western Avenue, Boston, MA 02134. You can purchase this series directly from the WGBH collection, P.O. Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08543; (800) 828-WGBH. An interactive video disk (for IBM and Macintosh) has been developed by Optical Data; contact WGBH of Boston about its availability.

Successful education in schools about the Columbian voy-

ages depends upon the solid and ever-expanding knowledge base of the teacher. Elementary and secondary school history teachers, therefore, must accept the never-ending challenge of reading and learning about the life and times of Columbus to provide themselves and their students with accurate information and interpretations.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system. They are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), which is available in most large public or university libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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